Sermon for 4th of Easter Year C

Readings: Rev 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

i

It was Hanukkah in Jerusalem, the Festival of Lights. The festival celebrated the time when the temple had been renewed at the victorious conclusion to the Maccabean Revolt which overthrew the Greek, Seleucid regime. Epiphanes IV had desecrated the temple on 25 December 167BC by enforcing the first pagan sacrifice there. He wanted the temple taxes to pay off his debts to Rome. The Maccabean family led the insurrection and on 25 December 164BC the temple was re-dedicated at the first Hanukkah festival.

In the days of Jesus, most of the Jews were hoping for a Maccabean style Messiah who would get rid of the Romans in the same way as the Judas Maccabeus had got rid of the Greeks. This is the nub of the controversy we hear about in John 10:22-30.

Jesus also cleanses the temple, but not by military might, like Judas Maccabeus. Jesus cleanses it from its own people who have turned it into a market place (John 2:16). Jesus doesn’t then rededicate the temple, but **replaces it**. His body is the new temple (John 2:21-22).

The question was: would the Jewish people respond to his style of Messiah – or stick to their preference for a Maccabean style?

Jesus uses the image of the Shepherd to describe his style. His leadership is about caring, nurturing, guiding, protecting. It is a very gentle image of leadership. It is about self-sacrifice. If any blood has to be spilt it is to be the blood of the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).

Those who ask Jesus for a “plain answer” whether he is the Messiah or not are from the hostile group who confronted Jesus in John 9 about the curing of the blind man in the pool of Siloam. He has plainly done marvellous deeds, but he still doesn’t fit their picture of a Messiah.

Jesus points to the deeds themselves to say: unless you can see the hand of God in the deeds I have done, you cannot be part of my flock. You do not know me. If Jesus had simply answered “yes” to their question that would beg the question: what sort of Messiah was he claiming to be: Their kind of Messiah? No, Jesus is a shepherd- Messiah, not a warrior-Messiah.

John writes his Gospel in the knowledge that most Jews continued with their warrior-Messiah dream. John knew that it had turned out to be the nightmare that Jesus predicted it would be. By the time John wrote in the late 80s or early 90s AD, Jerusalem has been destroyed, the temple ruined, the Jewish leadership banished from the city to the town of Jamnia, and Masada had ended in mass suicide.

ii

Jesus says that to those who do believe, he gives eternal life. It is easy to imagine Jesus is only thinking of life after death, but as we have seen in John 6:47, Jesus says, “He who believes in me **has** eternal life.” Wesley also points out that Jesus says, “I give,” and not “I **will give**” in this verse.

So what can Jesus have meant by saying: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never die” (v28)?

John faithfully records these words and yet he will have known that Peter and John and James and many others have died already, possibly 25 years ago or so.

For John especially, and for other NT writers, eternal life isn’t just a future hope beyond death, but also a new quality of life in the here and now for those who believe and enjoy life in the Holy Spirit.

Life in the flock of the Good Shepherd bestows a foretaste or anticipation of the life of heaven. Yes, the passage does also mean that death itself will not be able to wrestle those who belong to Christ from his grasp, but it also emphasises the present reality of belonging to Jesus.

Those who belong to Jesus live in this world, but they are no longer of this world. Within the flock there is opportunity now to love one another as Christ has loved us. John’s Pastoral Epistles stress the importance of loving the people we can see as a credible sign that we truly love God who we cannot see (1 John 4:11-12, 20).

The Church is called upon to show to the world what the alternative looks like. The alternative to living according to the various political dogmas of this world is to live according to the ways of the kingdom of heaven which is a kingdom led by the Good Shepherd in which love, peace and unity prevail.

It is a constant challenge to the Christian Church to live out its faith in this world and not just hope for the world to come. Nietzsche put it so trenchantly, “His followers will have to look as though they are saved for me to believe” (Also Sprach Zarathrustra).

iii

Jesus is making a megalomaniac claim that **he is the dispenser** of eternal life. It is blasphemy to many of his hearers. Yet things are about to get worse!

“The Father and I are one,” says Jesus.

This prompts his hearers to pick up stones ready to kill him. “We do not want to stone you because of any good deeds, but because of your blasphemy, they explain, “You are only a man, but you are trying to make yourself God, (John 10:33).

This is the fault-line, this is the tectonic clash between Judaism and Christianity as John sees it. The nature of who Jesus is runs through John’s Gospel and letters from start to finish.

Time precludes listing them all, but a few pointers are these:

John 1:1 “Before the world was created was the Word; he was with God, and he was the same as God.”

John 1:14 “The Word became flesh, full of grace and truth, and lived among us.”

John 1:35 “Behold the Lamb of God.”

John 3:35 “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not have life, but remains under God’s punishment.”

John 5:22 “The Father does not judge anyone. He has given his Son full right to judge…”

John 8:58 “Before Abraham was born, I Am.”

John 14: 9 “He who has seen me has seen the Father.”

1 John 2:2 “Christ himself is the means by which our sins are forgiven, and not our sins only, but the sins of everyone.”

Rev 7:17 “…the Lamb who sits in the centre of the throne, will be their shepherd…”

It will be very easy now to drown you in a sea of long theological words. I need to be careful for my own sake too, not to get out of my theological depth, but let me point towards the crucial importance of what theologians call *Christology.*

What Jesus means by, “I and the Father are one” is crucial for our understanding of the Christian faith. John believes it is because the Pharisees could not accept this teaching that they rejected Christ. John further shows that he understands these and many other words of Jesus to mean that Jesus was claiming to share the nature of God. And verse 33 shows us that the Pharisees understood Jesus in this sense; it was because he was “making himself God” that they had to reject him as a blasphemer.

At grave risk of over-simplification, I want to point out three ways in which this verse is foundational to Christian belief.

Firstly, it is not that Jesus is simply claiming to be one with God the Father **in purpose alone**. That would be a claim any prophet or servant of the Lord could make. Jesus is not saying that he is simply being obedient to the Father. He is obedient, but Jesus is saying far more than that. Jesus is not just another man who happens to understand the will of God better than others at the time.

Secondly, as Wesley points out in his *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, Jesus says, “I and the Father **are** one” and not “is” one.

The use of the word “are” supports the classic Nicene Creed and the Church’s doctrine of the Trinity. God is one, but there are three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Sabellius in the third century wanted to stress the oneness of God and so claimed that Jesus was just one mode or face of God for a time. The problem with Sabellius’ view is that if Jesus was just a passing phase, perhaps the Holy Spirit that follows Jesus as the next face of God could one day overturn what Jesus has said and done? After all, Jesus had reinterpreted much of what earlier prophets had said. Or perhaps the Spirit would become like another mystery or gnostic religion of the ancient world – in which the Spirit gave special, secret gifts to the chosen few.

The Church said no to Sabellius because Jesus is always the Word made flesh, he is the one through whom and against whom all truths are measured. He is the way, the truth and the life – not just for now, but forever. We cannot risk losing the face of Christ from our picture of God.

Thirdly, Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” – not “are two” or “are three.” Wesley says, this refutes the teaching of Arius another mid- 3rd century – early 4th century theologian who claimed Jesus did not always exist, but had been created by the Father and therefore was subordinate to the Father. Wesley says that Jesus as a man from Nazareth was subordinate to God the Father, but as God the eternal Son, Christ was equal with God the Father.

Arius’ teaching contradicts so much of what we find in the NT, especially John who emphasises that Jesus was the Word before the beginning of the world through whom all things were made, who was with God (a separate person of the Trinity we would say) and yet “was God” ( of the same being as God we would say).

Sabellius’ and Arius’ teachings are both refuted in the Nicene Creed of the Church produced under Athanasius’ leadership in 325AD:

***We believe in one God…***

***We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father; through him all things were made…***

***We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son…***

I hope my feeble attempt to demonstrate just how much was and remains at stake in that saying of Jesus hasn’t merely confused you.

The chief point I have been trying to get across to you is that it important for us to know what God is like - not what God wass like according to one man called Jesus who lived in Palestine 2,000 years ago – not what God was like for only a while.

What Christians claim for Jesus is that in Jesus we see clearly what God has always been like, what God is like now and what God will be like for evermore.

And what is God like? God is like a Good Shepherd who cares for, nurtures and guides his flock and loves them so much he is prepared to lay down the life of his only Son. Such love cannot be defeated, not even by death, because God is love.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard April 2015**